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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE DISCUSSES DEPARTMENT'S
HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

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Classified By: Ambassador Thomas N. Hull for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) On April 18, the Ambassador opened a one-day seminar organized by Sierra Leone's Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights. The seminar's agenda was based on the 2006 State Department's Country Report on Human Rights in Sierra Leone. Convened for the third consecutive year, most speakers viewed the report as accurate and fair and commended the Embassy for its work outlining human rights issues in Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and Chairman of the Council of Paramount Chiefs took exception, criticizing the report as being biased, inaccurate and unbalanced. Some participants felt the report did not adequately cover issues of housing rights, discrimination against people with disabilities, the death penalty, human rights abuses and violations in the mining sector, and the protection of environmental rights. Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Mrs. Jasmina King announced that the NHRC would draft a national human rights report by December 12007. Stakeholders emphasized that Sierra Leone's own Human Rights Report should be sensitive to traditional societal values and customs when assessing the status of human rights in the country.

12. (U) Attendees included a cross-section of senior-level Government of Sierra Leone (GOSL) officials, members of the new National Human Rights Commission, religious leaders, members of Parliament, political party representatives, paramount chiefs, international organization (IO) representatives, media representatives, and other civil society stakeholders. END SUMMARY.

AMBASSADOR ADDRESSES HUMAN RIGHTS SEMINAR

13. (U) On April 18, the Ambassador, DCM, and PolOff attended a one-day consultative meeting organized by the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights to review the 2006 U.S. Department of State's Country Report on Human Rights in Sierra Leone. This is the third consecutive year that Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights Dr. Alusine Fofanah has organized this event. Dr. Fofanah commended the Embassy for the report. He explained that he was first struck with the idea to hold a human rights seminar after he received a copy of the 2004 U.S. Department of State Human Rights report

from Ambassador Hull.

¶4. (U) In his opening speech, the Ambassador said, that while there is increasing respect for human rights in Sierra Leone, many obstacles remain before human rights will be fully protected. He emphasized human rights abuses in Sierra Leone are not systemic and, compared to many other African nations, Sierra Leone's record is quite good. However, he noted that many problems still exist, which reflect partly the lack of sufficient resources and capacity constraints, as well as the broader issues of extreme poverty and corruption. The Ambassador challenged Parliament to continue to pass legislation to meet the international human rights standards that it has already committed to by treaty.

PARAMOUNT CHIEFS AND POLICE CRITICIZE REPORT

¶5. (U) The representative from the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and the Chairman of the Council of Paramount Chiefs criticized the report saying it was inaccurate and biased. The SLP representative attacked the report for the manner in which portrayed the SLP as unprofessional and with no observance of the rule of law. He complained that, although the report insinuated that police malfeasance was treated with impunity, the report highlighted instances where appropriate action was taken by the Complaints, Discipline and Internal Investigations Department (CDIID) against members of the organization for misconduct. He said that this was misleading and contradictory.

¶6. (SBU) The Paramount Chief representative was critical of the report for its representation of certain aspects of traditional laws as violations of human rights. He said that people misunderstood that forced initiation and restrictions on the right of association were parts of the mode of operation of traditional society (Note: This was taken as a

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defense of FGM). He emphasized that it was important for traditional leaders to support and uphold the authority of the central government.

CIVIL SOCIETY APPLAUDS REPORT

¶7. (SBU) Most civil society members in attendance commended the report for heightening awareness and understanding of human rights and for raising important issues including women and children's rights, forced early marriage, and political intimidation. Many speakers took the opportunity to criticize the GOSL and the Parliament for an apparent reluctance to pass critical legislation on child and gender rights. (Comment: Currently, both sets of legislation are stalled; the Child Rights legislation in committee in the Parliament and the three gender bills are still with the Attorney General's office. Although President Kabbah has authorized a certificate of urgency to force a parliamentary vote to expedite legislation, there is speculation that Parliament will not pass the legislation before it dissolves on June 25. End Comment)

¶8. (SBU) A few speakers felt the report failed to adequately address housing rights, environmental rights, rights for people with disabilities, and human rights violations in the mining sector. They encouraged the Embassy to expand the report in these areas.

NHRC TO DRAFT OWN HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

¶9. (SBU) The day long meeting also introduced the members of the recently installed National Human Rights Commission

(NHRC), an independent body recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation. In her keynote address, Dr. Jamesina King, the newly elected NHRC chairperson, expressed concern about the challenges the NHRC has encountered since it was officially appointed in December. King noted the NHRC's financial difficulties of trying to secure funding to make it fully operational. So far, UNIOSIL has provided training and support, such as temporary office space, for NHRC members, and a plan has been drawn up to use Peace Building Funds for start up costs. While the GOSL has provided limited financial support, the Commissioners still had not been paid and approval of the five commissioners' salaries was still pending before the Ministry of Finance.

¶10. (U) King said that the NHRC intends to write its own human rights report by December 2007. Seminar participants held a discussion towards the end of the session to solicit input on what issues stakeholders believe the report should address. Ideas included building SLP capacity, addressing youth unemployment and poverty, and conducting awareness-building seminars.

VICE PRESIDENT RESPONDS TO REPORT

¶11. (C) In a previous, separate meeting with the Ambassador, Vice President Berewa said he had read the HRR and had some objections. Although he agreed with certain areas, he felt that the Embassy's description of prison conditions, land ownership issues and criminal libel laws was inaccurate. He pledged the GOSL's commitment to improve on human rights failings, but urged the Embassy to share incidents with the GOSL instead of just reporting them. He explained, "We are answerable to what is in the report" and "the facts are correct, but it is the way they are painted that matters." The Ambassador expressed his appreciation for GOSL concern. He noted that Sierra Leone came out well in the report compared to other countries and encouraged Berewa to convey the GOSL's views on the weaknesses of the report more formally so that the Embassy can re-examine them as it prepares the next report.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) As was noted during the seminar, this year's report showed that the GOSL is making progress addressing human rights abuses in Sierra Leone. It also is encouraging that the report appears to be widely-read by stakeholders thanks to targeted distribution. Marked improvements during the year included the launching of the National Human Rights

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Commission, continuing capacity building among the ranks of the Sierra Leone Police and ongoing support for the TIP National Task Force to combat Trafficking in Persons. However, Sierra Leone continues to struggle mightily under the weight of capacity issues, poverty, corruption, and strong traditional values resistant to outside pressure to conform to international human rights standards. The NHRC's announcement of its intent to produce its own human rights report and the valuable work of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights are encouraging signs and will continue to boost dialogue on human rights in Sierra Leone. END COMMENT.
HULL